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# Pulling the curtains back on spin

Know your “astroturfing” from your “flogs”? Former US health insurance industry insider Wendell Potter talks to Karen McColl about spin, becoming a whistleblower, and whether the government’s latest proposals will rein in the UK lobbying industry



The death of 17 year old Nataline Sarkisyan, who had initially been denied a liver transplant by her health insurer Cigna, was the final straw. Before that, there had been the sight of thousands of Americans travelling hundreds of miles to a Virginia fairground to queue for hours to receive free medical care. Patients were receiving care from volunteer doctors, nurses, and dentists in animal stalls and barns. Wendell Potter had had enough.

In his 19 years in the US health insurance industry, Potter was a practitioner of the “dark arts” of public relations (PR). And it’s not just the US where dubious practices are used. In December a series of news stories in the *Independent* exposed PR methods deployed in the UK by executives of Bell Pottinger Public Affairs.<sup>1 2</sup>

Today, Potter is one of the fiercest critics of corporate public relations and lobbying, and of the US health insurance industry’s efforts to derail health reforms. When he resigned from his job as head of public relations at Cigna corporation in June 2008—soon after Nataline Sarkisyan’s death and almost a year after his visit to Remote Area Medical’s health fair in Wise County, Virginia—he did not intend to turn whistleblower. He just knew that he didn’t have it in him any more to work in the industry.

Nearly a year later he was watching television coverage of one of President Obama’s early meetings on healthcare reform, when he heard a congressman from his home state of Tennessee reiterating some of the insurance industry talking points he and his colleagues had been working on before he quit his job. He decided then that he had to speak out, and a few months later he was testifying in front of the US senate. He went on to publish a book, *Deadly Spin*, to “pull the curtains back,” on how the insurance industry operates and how special interests manipulate public opinion and influence public policy.<sup>3</sup>

“Rather than obscuring the truth, as I once did, I’m now trying to explain very fully, as much as possible, how the industry really operates and how it is largely responsible for the United States having both the most expensive healthcare system in the world and one of the most inequitable,” he explains.

In the UK, much of the concern focuses on how lobbyists help their clients to access political circles—sometimes that may mean meeting government ministers at “private” events that do not have to be declared under the ministerial code. Such practices came to public attention last year when the defence secretary Liam Fox resigned because of close links to the

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lobbyist Adam Werritty. Other tactics that have been highlighted include ensuring that a company has a positive online image by, for example, editing Wikipedia entries or using search engine optimisation techniques to ensure that Google searches throw up favourable websites and drown out negative stories.

### Media manipulation

Potter has first hand experience of some of these tactics, and he knows only too well that they have been used on the health policy battlefield. “When I read the *Independent* article I was dismayed because, clearly, the problems that you have in Britain are very similar to the problems that we have in the US,” he notes. “The techniques that are used are very similar on both sides of the Atlantic.”

Potter was involved in the health insurance industry’s campaign to prevent Michael Moore’s 2007 film *Sicko* from triggering a populist movement for health reform. “That was something that the health insurance industry feared most, so we set out to try to discredit Michael Moore and his movie,” recalls Potter. The highly secretive campaign strategy included creation of a front group—Health Care America—to undermine the film’s messages and to make sure that the industry’s points got media coverage. While the insurance companies would position themselves as part of the solution, Health Care America, largely funded by the health insurance industry, would try to stoke fears of government run health systems.

“In America you wait in line to see a movie. In government run healthcare systems, you wait to see a doctor.” That was the message being pushed by newspaper advertisements sponsored by Health Care America after *Sicko* started showing in US cinemas. Potter has since publicly apologised to Moore, who has, in turn, lauded the former insurance insider’s bravery in speaking out.

In his book, Potter describes an earlier stealth campaign to undermine bipartisan efforts to pass President Clinton’s proposed patients’ bill of rights. He describes how another front group, the Health Benefits Coalition, set out to convince the public that such a bill would ultimately increase the cost of insurance premiums. The industry also fought against President Obama’s reforms. Although Potter had by then left the industry, he describes the industry’s campaign tactics as including, “misleading ads, coordinated attacks by conservative opinion columnists and health policy experts for hire, deceptive studies and reports, and front groups that ran antireform ads or orchestrated Tea Party events, funded at least in part by insurers.”



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Potter has described the creation of front groups and other “third party” techniques as among the most common and effective PR tactics, many of which were pioneered by tobacco companies. They are widely reported to have orchestrated apparent grassroots campaigns (a technique known as astroturfing after the fake grass used on football pitches) by organising, and paying for, smokers’ rights groups. A key message from Potter is that knowing how to decode spin is an important skill in today’s world and that the best defence is to be sceptical.

Potter also sounds a warning about the efforts of powerful American corporations to influence NHS reforms. During a visit to the UK last year he became aware that these companies were operating behind the scenes in Britain. “They are finding that the reforms in the US that were passed a couple of years ago may shrink their profit margins to a certain extent, so they are looking to other places to make a profit,” he says. “And the UK is one of the countries they have targeted.” He urges British citizens to find out more about what these companies are doing.

### Regulation

“The tools and techniques of public relations are not, in and of themselves, evil. It is how they are used,” Potter points out. Indeed, some of the practices that give cause for concern are against

the industry’s codes of practice. The Chartered Institute of Public Relations’ code of practice on social media, for example, states that astroturfing and creating fake blogs (known as flogs) constitute “bad practice” and advises members to avoid using these techniques.<sup>4</sup> The codes, however, are only voluntary.

What does Potter think needs to be done to limit the influence of vested interests on public policy? He is clear that better regulation is needed. “I think there is no doubt that lobbying and influence peddling are inadequately regulated in both the US and the UK.”

For now, lawmakers in the US have gone further than the Westminster government. American lobbyists—whether they are directly employed by a company or they work for a PR company—are required to register their activities and to declare how much money is spent on trying to influence government officials. Proposals for a statutory register of lobbyists in the UK were published for consultation on 20 January.<sup>5</sup> Transparency campaigners have described them as lacking breadth and depth and as being a triumph for the lobbying industry.<sup>6</sup> Only lobbyists working for a third party (that is, lobbying or PR agencies) will be required to register. This means that the activities of in-house lobbyists will remain under the radar. And, because under the proposed rules there will be no requirement to declare which subjects have been raised by lobbyists or how much money has been spent, it will be difficult to know where lobbying has had an influence.

Although the rules are tighter in the US, Potter thinks even more action is needed. “The work of public relations agencies and third party firms needs to be scrutinised much more closely than it is,” he claims. “I think the first step is to have some government investigations into the extent of this influence peddling and what the consequences are. I think lawmakers then need to determine what are the appropriate steps to attempt to regulate them.”

Despite the enormous scale of the lobbying and public relations industry, and the pervasive influence of vested interests on public policy, Potter is optimistic. He believes that the Occupy movement, for example, will continue to press corporations and others to change their behaviour. “I think as more people become aware and understanding of what is really going on, they’ll demand greater measures of accountability and transparency.”

Karen McColl freelance writer, Savoie, France  
karenmccoll@gmail.com

Competing interests: None declared.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

References are in the version on bmj.com.

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2012;344:e833